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What we talk about when we talk "About Love": Carver and Chekhov

Laurie Champion

"I'm a great admirer of Chekhov's short stories,
and I will borrow from Chekhov at the risk of
parody. I'll borrow something that he said."[1]
Raymond Carver

1 Frequent comparisons between Raymond Carver and Anton Chekhov trace Carver's allusions to Chekhov in *Errand*, a quasi-historical account of Chekhov's death, or in larger arguments briefly refer to similarities in the two writers' techniques. Since Chekhov's influence is representative of Carver's career, it is surprising that the specific ways Carver incorporates Chekhov's writing ideologies have hitherto gone unacknowledged. An examination of Carver's themes and techniques suggests that he believed in art's transcendent power and consciously and unconsciously borrowed from Chekhov. In fact, Carver welcomed for himself and recommended to others artistic transcendence generally and Chekhov's influence specifically: "Anyone who reads literature, anyone who believes, as one must in the transcendent power of art, sooner or later has to read Chekhov. And just now may be a better time than any" (*Unknown* 146).

2 When discussing writers who influenced him, Carver invariably mentions Chekhov; moreover he repeatedly uses superlatives that suggest Chekhov most significantly influenced his fiction. Asked about literary influences, Carver answers : "Chekhov. I suppose he's the writer whose work I most admire. But who doesn't like Chekhov?...Reading what Chekhov had to say... made me see things differently than I had ever before" (Simpson and Buzbee 46-47). Carver tells another interviewer that he "wrote more carefully" and "better" as the result of reading other writers. He adds, "I never had any one particular writer over and above all the other writers, unless it was Chekhov. I think he is the best short story writer who ever lived" (O'Connell 139). When asked about non-living talented writers, Carver mentions a few, then adds, "Chekhov comes first to my mind. I've never met a writer who didn't love Chekhov" (Bonetti 23).

3 Clearly, Carver felt great admiration for Chekhov and invited Chekhov's artistic influence; however, when asked if he uses other writers' stories as a model for his own, Carver answers:

> I think every writer does that to some extent. He is unconsciously setting his own stories against stories of writers he most admires--Chekhov or Tolstoy or Ernest Hemingway or Flannery O'Connor, or whomever. But by the time I was finished with each of my stories, the original model was so far removed, so far back in the misty past, that the finished product bore no resemblance to what I started out with (Alton 152).

4 The above quote raises interesting questions involving just how "far removed" Chekhov's "original model(s)" are from Carver's "finished product(s)". Although strong similarities between Chekhov's and Carver's fiction contradict the above quote, these similarities support many other statements Carver makes about Chekhov's influence. Carver's statements about Chekhov suggest unequivocally that Carver consciously solicited Chekhov's influence, sought to build on Chekhov's accomplishments; yet simultaneously Carver strived to give his stories artistic merit in their own right, depart from Chekhov's techniques or any specific literary tradition. Carver acknowledges that it is not degree of artistic talent but writers' "particular and unmistakable signature on everything" they write that distinguishes mediocre writers from those who "may be around for a time" (*On Writing* 22).

5 It seems apropos to contribute Carver's "minimalist" style to one and many techniques he borrows from Chekhov. Carver's stories are firmly established as exemplary of the minimalist tradition, a tradition viewed unfavorably by many contemporary critics. Most of the negative commentary about minimalism recognizes it as an American tradition that began with Hemingway and was revived in the 1970s and 80s by writers such as Carver, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, Frederick Barthelme, and Jayne Anne Phillips. Kim Herzinger says, "Chekhov, surely, is the father of minimalist writing" (74); Charles May suggests that Carver is "perhaps the contemporary short story writer who is closest to Chekhov" (160). Carver's style relies heavily on techniques Chekhov outlines for effective short story writing: "no undue emphasis on political, social, or economic factors; persistent objectivity; veracity in the description of active figures and objects; absolute brevity; boldness and originality; and no triteness or insincerity" (Simmons xiv; Stull 200). Minimalism is defined as "a) formally sparse, terse, trim; b) tonally cool, detached, noncommittal... laconic; c) oblique and elliptical; d) relatively plotless; e) concerned with surface detail; f) depthless; g) comparatively oblique about personal, social, political, or cultural history..." (Herzinger 73). Carver and Chekhov consistently employ the above techniques in their fiction. It is probable that Carver read Chekhov's outline of the basis for good short story writing, but it seems unlikely a writer of Carver's stature would follow step-by-step instructions as a guide for effective short story writing. It seems more probable that these stylistic similarities reflect an unconscious influence, for prolifically reading one writer naturally leads to absorbing ideologies and practices. Ways Carver departs from Chekhov's style include elements attributed to minimalism such as using brand names, providing no last name for his characters, and expressing little political history.

6 Examples of more specific ways Carver both builds on and departs from Chekhov's influence can be illustrated by comparing Chekhov's well known *Little Trilogy* with the title story from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, a collection representative of techniques and themes Carver consistently uses throughout his career. One of the most

significant similarities between these works involves structural devices the story share. All stories in Chekhov's trilogy, *About Love*, *The Man in a Case*, and *Gooseberries*, develop as frame narratives that envelope story propers told by one of the characters. The tellers of the enveloped tales serve as listeners in the other stories[2]. As in Chekhov's trilogy, Carver's story is a frame story: Nick narrates the overall story, repeating tales told by Mel. Nick speaks from the first-person point of view and does not provide his personal story proper; thus, he becomes exclusive narrator for Carver's story and as character one of the three listeners for Mel's tales.

7 A frame device entails unique structural beginnings and endings, aspects of fiction Carver examined when he read Chekhov: "Look at the beginning of any short story that you admire. Look at Chekhov's beginnings, the first sentence or two. You're right there in that room, it's irresistible" (Pope and McElhinny 17); Chekhov "liked beginnings and endings. I really feel that's true in my case" (Pope and McElhinny 12). In both *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and the stories in the *Little Trilogy* at least two beginnings and two endings emerge--the beginnings and endings of the frame stories, the stories Chekhov and Carver portray through narrators, and the narrative propers, the tales characters tell. Obviously, the framing device invites readers to interpret the enveloped tales as well as encasing stories. This device also allows readers to interpret characters' reactions to the enveloped tale.

8 *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and *Love About* begin with brief narratives of restaurant settings, immediately followed by brief dialogue passages before beginning the enveloped tales. Carver's story opens with Nick's portrayal of the setting, establishing that two couples sit at a table and drink gin. Likewise, Chekhov's narrator describes setting, establishing that at least three men sit and eat lunch. Of course, the setting in both stories is similar, but more importantly, the subject of both stories is established immediately after descriptions of the settings. Nick says, "We somehow got on the subject of love" (137); Chekhov's narrator says, "We began talking about love" (380). Both introductions intertextually employ narrators who signify forthcoming subjects. Additionally, the titles of both stories use intertextual theme denotation. Not only does Carver employ an extension of Chekhov's title, both titles blatantly reveal subject, using "About" as reflexive signifiers.

9 Ivan Ivanovitch narrates the beginning of *About Love*, but an omniscient narrator narrates the ending of the story. In the opening frame the first-person plural pronouns "we" and "us" are used to refer to characters. Alehin and Burkin are referred to in the third person, establishing that they are not narrating the opening passage. In the closing frame the third-person plural "they" is used, and all three characters are referred to in the third person : "While Alehin was telling his story, the rain left off and the sun came out. Burkin and Ivan Ivanovitch went out on the balcony..." (302). One possibility is that an unidentified fourth person sits at the table and narrates the story; however, this is unlikely because no other evidence suggests a fourth presence. In Carver's story Nick narrates the story in the first person, but Mel narrates his stories in both third and first person, techniques similar to narrative devices in *Gooseberries*, where Ivan Ivanovitch tells the story of his brother Nikolay in the third person but interjects narrative intrusions in the first person.

10 In *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, *About Love*, and *The Man in a Case*, brief introductory tales are told before the primary tales begin. Mel and Terri discuss Terri's first marriage, Ivan Ivanovitch summarizes Alehin's tale about Pelagea and Nikanor, and

the omniscient narrator of *The Man in a Case* explains that Burkin and Ivan Ivanovitch discuss Mavra's self-seclusion. In all these stories the brief narratives provide preambles to the primary tales. Rather than merely portraying a narrator who summarizes the preamble, Chekhov clarifies that the narrator is summarizing a tale that was told earlier. In both Carver's and Chekhov's stories, the same character who tells the primary tale also participates in the preamble. The primary tale juxtaposed against the preamble suggests a sort of associative thinking on the part of the characters.

11 Before they begin their primary tales, Mel, Alehin, and Burkin provide narrative abstracts that disclose the points of their forthcoming tales. Before his primary tale, the story about the elderly couple, Mel says, "I'll tell you what real love is... I'll give you a good example. And then you can draw your own conclusions... What do any of us really know about love?" (144). After a brief digression, Mel reintroduces his story, returns to earlier intentions to explain love: "I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going to prove a point. You see, this happened a few months ago, but it's still going on right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk about love" (146).

12 Before beginning his primary tale, Alehin says, "How love is born... how far questions of personal happiness are of consequence in love--all that is unknown... So far only one incontestable truth has been uttered about love: 'This is a great mystery'" (289-90). Alehin explains that each instance of love requires individual explanation : "We ought... to individualize each case" (290). As John Freedman points out, when Alehin says, "We Russians of the educated class have a partiality for these questions that remain unanswered. Love is usually poeticized, decorated with roses, nightingales; we Russians decorate our loves with these momentous questions..."(290), he immediately makes a general statement about love, thus contradicting himself (110). His contradiction suggests confusion, he struggles to define love and is unable to articulate a sound definition. Both Mel's and Alehin's narrative summaries suggest that since love cannot be defined explicitly, they will attempt an implicit definition.

13 Burkin is also unable to articulate a precise definition of the concept he announces he will illustrate. He says:

> There are plenty of people in the world, solitary by temperament, who try to retreat into their shell like a hermit crab or snail. Perhaps it is an instance of atavism... who knows? I am not a natural science man, and it is not my business to settle such questions; I only mean to say that people like Mavra are not uncommon. There is no need to look far... (250).

14 Burkin's narrative abstract implies that reasons for a person's insularity cannot be defined precisely; thus, like Mel and Alehin, he announces he will tell a story that provides an example of an undefinable, abstract concept.

15 Although when Alehin finishes his tale, Chekhov's narrator immediately resumes, in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, *The Man in a Case*, and *Gooseberries* the storytellers end their tales with narrative evaluations that announce implications of their stories. After he finishes telling about Terri and her ex-husband, Mel says, "I'm not interested in that kind of love... If that's love, you can have it" (142). After he completes his tale about the elderly couple, Mel repeats his conclusion, stresses his implied point : "I mean, it was killing the old fart just because he couldn't *look* at the fucking woman.... Do you see what I'm saying?" (151). Similarly, Burkin concludes, "How many such men in cases were left, how many more of them there will be!" (267). Before Chekhov's narrator resumes the enveloping story, Ivan Ivanovitch provides further evaluation of Burkin's narrative: "'Yes

that is just how it is,' repeated Ivan Ivanovitch; 'and isn't our living in town, airless and crowded, our writing useless papers, our playing *vint*--isn't that all a sort of a case for us?'" (267). Here, Ivan Ivanovitch provides a subtle transition from Burkin's tale to the tale he tells in *Gooseberries*, the story that follows *The Man in a Case*. He continues his remark to Burkin : "If you like, I will tell you a very edifying story" (267); of course, *Gooseberries* becomes the "edifying" tale Ivan Ivanovitch narrates.

16 In *Gooseberries* Ivan Ivanovitch's tale can be divided into two parts: the part that describes his brother and the part that relates to himself. When he ends his discussion about his brother, he provides closure:

> I saw a happy man whose cherished dream was so obviously fulfilled... There is always, for some reason, an element of sadness mingled with my thoughts of human happiness... I was overcome by an oppressive feeling that was close upon despair (282).

17 Although Ivan Ivanovitch is still telling his tale, he shifts focus from his brother to himself. Earlier, while still discussing his brother, Ivan Ivanovitch disrupts his narrative and says, "But the point just now is not he, but myself. I want to tell you the change that took place in me during the brief hours I spent at his country place" (281).

18 After Ivan Ivanovitch finishes discussing his brother, he returns to his earlier proclamations that his tale really concerns himself. Frequently, he interrupts his tale with bold proclamations and didactic statements such as "The happy man only feels at ease because the unhappy bear their burdens in silence, and without that silence happiness would be impossible" (283). He concludes his tale with a plea to Alehin : "Don't be calm and contented, don't let yourself be put to sleep! While you are young, strong, confident, be not weary in well-doing!... Do good" (285). His plea to Alehin marks the end of his discourse, his final conclusion, and he makes his point more intensely, more overtly than Mel, Alehin, or Burkin.

19 The frame device employed in both *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and Chekhov's trilogy serves to illustrate theme self-reflexively, as a major theme in all four stories involves storytelling itself. As Freedman observes, the stories in Chekhov's trilogy all refer "to the theme of story-telling, and in most cases the message is borne by Chekhov's narrator, either by direct narrative statement or by the manipulation of dialogue, setting, and mood... Burkin, Ivan Ivanych, and Alekhin are, above all, story-tellers" (115).

20 Freedman analyzes ways characters in Chekhov's trilogy function as listeners and "edit" storytellers when they digress from their tales. Characters in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* function as similar listeners and editors. When Mel and Terri begin to digress from their tale about Terri's ex-husband, Nick asks, "What do you mean, he bungled it?" (140). After a brief pause, Nick again asks, "How'd he bungle it when he killed himself?" (140). When Mel returns to his narrative, he says, "I'll tell you what happened" (140), signifying that he has concluded his digression and will return to his tale.

21 Mel, however, does not proceed sequentially, for he doesn't explain Terri's ex-husband's suicide. Laura asks, "But what exactly happened after he shot himself?... What happened?" (141). Later, Mel begins to digress from his tale about the elderly couple, and all three listeners prompt him to return to his narrative. Laura asks, "What about the old couple? You didn't finish that story you started" (150). Nick asks, "What about the old couple?" and Terri says, "Go on with your story, hon... Then what happened?" (150). Again Laura asks, "What happened?" and Terri repeats his request : "Tell your story"

(150-51). Many other references to storytelling are made in Carver's story, some of which are discussed above to illustrate narrative openings. Repeated references to storytelling and the portrayal of characters' desires to have tellers complete their tales point to storytelling as a significant theme in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

22 Many stories in the collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* reflect Carver's portrayal of storytelling as theme. In *Everything Stuck to Him* (an early version of "Distance"), the story that precedes the title story, Carver also employs a frame device that allows characters to tell tales. Although "Distance" is told in the first person, the storyteller uses third-person narration to describe to his daughter the story about his own marriage to her mother. Even though the storyteller oddly speaks about himself in the third person, this narrative device provides his story with classic fairy tale narrative language such as "the boy", "the girl", and "the baby". The enveloped tale and the language draw attention to storytelling, and even the storyteller creates a "fictionalized" version of his personal history. *A Serious Talk*, another story that is as much about discourse as it about the situation that the plot unravels, immediately follows *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* in the collection.

23 One subject of many stories in the collection is love--more precisely, discourse, what people talk about when they talk about love. Many stories throughout Carver's career are concerned with discourse and demonstrate communication modes. Because characters' personalities and ideologies are revealed through discourse, readers are invited to interpret both the surface-level discussion and the dynamics of what occurs between characters during discourse. Ironically, ways people fail to communicate or connect with one another becomes apparent when examining discourse among characters. Although Mel does most of the talking *in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, he is the character who most apparently fails to communicate or connect with others. Several times throughout his narratives he gets frustrated because he feels unable to articulate. Mel's inability to communicate is most apparent when he misuses the word "vessel" for "vassal", a malapropism that symbolizes his inability to articulate. When Terri corrects him, he becomes defensive, saying, "Vassals, vessels... what the fuck's the difference? You knew what I meant anyway.... So I'm not educated" (149). Unlike Mel's inability to communicate, Nick and Laura communicate with nonverbal gestures such as a soft touch or a smile. While Nick and Laura successfully communicate through subtle gestures, Mel is unable to communicate even when he shouts and announces his point. Mel's inability to communicate is significantly related to his inability to connect with others, his loneliness, and his inability to experience the type of love Laura and Nick or the elderly couple share.

24 Mel also symbolically separates himself from others. Digressing from his tale about the elderly couple, Mel says if he could choose a different life in a different place and time, he would like to be a medieval knight. He says, "You were pretty safe wearing all that armor... But what I liked about knights, besides their ladies, was that they had that suit of armor, you know, and they couldn't get hurt very easy. No cars in those days, you know? No drunk teenagers to tear into your ass" (148-49). Mel suggests armor would protect him physically, and his example about the car implies a lack of armor caused the elderly couple's physical injuries. Terri says, "But sometimes they suffocated in all that armor, Mel. They'd even have heart attacks if it got too hot and they were too tired and worn out" (149). Mel seeks emotional distance to prevent suffering from a failed close relationship. On the other hand, Terri recognizes the "suffocating" effects of reclusion.

She uses for an example a "heart attack", alluding both to physical and spiritual damages to the human heart as one example of the consequences of reclusion.

25 Mel's description of himself dressed as a beekeeper further establishes his need for physical protection. Late in the story when Mel begins to discuss his desire for revenge upon his ex-wife, he says, "Sometimes I think I'll go up there dressed like a beekeeper. You know, that hat that's like a helmet with the plate that comes down over your face, the big gloves, and the padded coat?" (153). Again, Mel uses language loaded with imagery that reveals he desires isolation. Mel's description is similar to Burkin's description of the way Byelikov, the man in the case, dresses:

> Byelikov was remarkable for always wearing galoshes and a warm wadded coat, and carrying an umbrella even in the very finest weather... He wore dark spectacles and flannel vests, stuffed up to his ears with cottonwool... In short, the man displayed a constant and insurmountable impulse to wrap himself in a covering, to make himself, so to speak, a case which should isolate him and protect him from external influences (250).

26 Whereas Byelikov desires emotional isolation from people in general, Mel seeks isolation to evade romantic commitment. Mel views the heart in terms of its physical function, a machine-like instrument. He says, "I'm a heart surgeon, sure, but I'm just a mechanic. I go in and I fuck around and I fix things" (149). Mel's professional view of the heart extends to his personal view, an ideology that ignores emotional connotations. Unlike the psychological armor that Mel and Byelikov desire, the elderly man in Mel's tale desires to remove the casts that prevent him from expressing his love for his wife. Body casts prevent the couple from looking at each other, a means of communication that transcends language. The elderly couple represents "real love" and acts as a foil for Mel, who is unable to love and desires reclusion. Self-imposed human isolation is a major theme in *The Man in a Case*, and like *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and *About Love*, it reveals its subject intertextually.

27 While Carver portrays human isolation in many of his stories, *Cathedral* most distinctly suggests this condition. Chekhov also frequently portrays human isolation, most obviously in *The Man in a Case*. Kirk Nesset examines Carver's portrayal of isolation, and Reamy Jansen compares Byelikov's isolation to the protagonist of *Cathedral*. Jansen observes that Carver introduces:

> the complainer, a figure, ironically, with greater potential for loneliness than any of Carver's earlier characters... Though unique to Carver, the complainer recalls Chekhov's later characters, his 'men in cases', whose mutual unsurpassable isolation sets them adrift from family and society (397).

28 Class distinction, a minor theme in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, parallels a major theme in *Gooseberries*. Ivan Ivanovitch fears that Alehin might become disillusioned into believing he is content. Ivan Ivanovitch realizes that his brother does not help mass society, and he disagrees with his attitude toward the peasants. Mel and Terri also discuss class distinction. Mel says he would like to be a knight, and Terri asks him to consider if he became a serf. Mel says, "The serfs never had it good" and considers that even knights were vassals to someone (148). Mel's discussion about knights, serfs, and vassals suggests a master-slave relationship. Although Mel does not make a conscious connection, many theories of love involve the idea of a master-slave relationship, one person becoming the lover, the other the loved.

29 Although romantic love is only a minor subject in the storyteller's tale in *The Man in a Case* , it is the primary subject of both the enveloping stories and the framed tales in *What We*

talk About When We Talk About Love and *About Love*, as both titles intimate. Significantly, a major theme in both stories is that love is undefinable, a theme that invites readers to consider definitions for themselves. The notion of a story raising unanswered questions is an idea Carver recognized in Chekhov's fiction: "Chekhov said you don't have to solve a problem in a story, you just have to present a problem accurately" (Moffet 242).

30 To portray Mel's and Alehin's inabilities to define love it is necessary to depict their struggled search for explanations. Indeed, their very confusion and search provide the crux of their narrative discourses. Carver acknowledges he borrows Chekhov's technique of giving voice to the confused:

> Chekhov "gave voice to people who were not so articulate. He found a means of letting those have their say as well. So in writing about people who aren't so articulate and who are confused and scared I'm not doing anything radically different" (McCaffey and Gregory 112).

31 By portraying characters who struggle for answers, Carver and Chekhov employ this means of giving voice to inarticulate people. The more sonorous point depicted is not the solution to questions, but ther search for answers, a symbolic grail for Mel, Alehin and readers.

32 As Carver's and Chekhov's styles and themes illustrate, it is not that "the world appears so dimly in Carver's work because he wasn't interested in the world" (Bell 64) or that minimalism is plotless and depthless or that "less is less", as many critics opposed to minimalism suggest, or even that in "Carver's fiction the real story, such as it is, appears to be what is on the page, and there is no evidence that more might have been said than the minimalist language implies but refuses to say" (Aldridge 51). Rather, Carver employs a subtle means to portray his themes, much like the subtle ways Laura and Nick communicate. Although Mel boldly announces several times that he loves or has loved various people, it is apparent he is incapable of such sentiments. Unlike Mel, Carver chooses not to reveal blatantly information that may or may not undermine his message. Instead, he chooses a writing style that subtly reveals depth, meaning and plot. Carver says that a story needs tension created partly by "the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things" ("Writing" 26).

33 It is appropriate to claim that Carver is representative of a short story tradition that began with Chekhov and was developed first in America by Hemingway, another writer Carver admired and often mentioned as a strong literary influence. What better artistic techniques and themes to build upon than Chekhov's, a writer May upholds as having liberated the short story "from its adherence to the parabolic exemplum" and fiction in general "from the tedium of the realistic" (162). Indeed, Carver's "minimalist" style is indebted to Chekhov, for as May suggests," [It] is clear that the contemporary short story, for all its much complained-of 'unreadability', owes a significant debt to the much-criticized 'storyless' stories of Chekhov" (162). Carver and Chekhov are recognized for their sparse style that indeed leaves, as Hemingway suggests, only one-eight of the story on the surface, but it is a style that invites readers to contribute their own interpretations through connections that are not and sometimes cannot be overtly communicated.

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NOTES

1. Pope and McElhinny, 16

2. To avoid confusion, I am borrowing Freedman's distinction between narrators and tellers: narrators refer to Carver's and Chekhov's narrators, narrators of the framing stories; storytellers or tellers refer to Mel, Alehin, Burkin and Ivan Ivanovitch, narrators of the enveloped stories.

RÉSUMÉS

Lorsqu'il parle des écrivains qui l'ont le plus influencé, Raymond Carver cite Anton Tchekhov. Le style minimaliste de Carver rappelle la stratégie narrative qu'utilise Anton Tchekhov. Les nouvelles de La Petite Trilogie et celle de Carver "De quoi parle-t-on quand on parle d'amour" sont comparées pour illustrer la manière dont Carver s'inspire de la stratégie de Tchekhov afin de construire un discours qui lui est propre. Ces quatre nouvelles ont en commun une représentation de l'amour romantique, de la solitude humaine et des différentes classes sociales.
La technique narrative présente également des similitudes: les quatre récits enchâssés sont incapables de définir précisément les concepts qu'ils annoncent, transformant l'acte narratif en enjeu du récit.
L'échec de la communication transparaît lorsqu'on analyse les dialogues. La difficulté qu'éprouvent les narrateurs à formuler leur pensée sous-entend que l'exploration des solutions est plus importante que les solutions elles-mêmes. L'écriture minimaliste de Raymond Carver engendre des tensions entre ce qui est dit et ce qui est suggéré, technique qui suscite la participation active du lecteur.

AUTEURS

LAURIE CHAMPION

Sul Ross State University